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# Special education needs activities for children with language difficulties: A comparative study in Belarusian and Norwegian preschools

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## ABSTRACT

For the purposes of this study, we investigated how special educational needs activities were carried out in the available physical space for preschool children with language difficulties in Belarus and Norway. Muller's and Bernstein's concepts were used to recognise patterns of knowledge construction in special needs education. A qualitative comparative case study approach was used, and through video observations, four categories were identified that exposed various positions within the continuum of the following binary pairs: *regulated – flexible; pre-defined – diffuse; consequential – casual; repetitive – disruptive*. The preschools in both countries showed different profiles. The Belarusian preschools were oriented towards the first notion in the binary pairs, while the Norwegian preschools leaned towards the latter. The implications of the study's results deal with the question of preschool staff preparation, knowledge construction in special needs education, construction and content of curricular documents and the question of promoting a closer dialogue between different practices.

## KEYWORDS

Special needs education; language difficulties; preschool; comparative study; physical space

## Introduction

Language difficulties (LD) constitute the most prevalent types of special educational needs (SEN) in many countries. Children with LD in preschools constitute a case in point (Bele, 2008; Leonard, 2014; Lindsay & Strand, 2016). Internationally, about 4-10% of preschool children aged 5–6 are considered to have LD as a primary, specific difficulty. However, diagnosis is problematic because of issues related to diagnostic labels and debates about the existing diagnostic criteria.

Significant criticism of LD's validity and usability as a diagnostic category has been submitted and because of the early age of the children, practice from preschools in both countries reveals that children often lack any determined formal diagnosis (Bal, 2011; Bishop, 2014; Lindsay & Strand, 2016). However, this group of children is reported in both countries to be largest with regard to receiving special educational assistance (Hollung-Møllerhaug, 2010; Lindsay & Strand, 2016; Ministry of Education of the

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Republic of Belarus [MOE], 2016; Reiling & Wendelborg, 2015). The consequences of LD are often underestimated, and it is claimed that children with LD are at risk of developing behavioural, social and academic problems and are more often subjected to bullying (Bele, 2008; Bishop, 2014; Dockrell & Lindsay, 2000; Leonard, 2014).

Paradoxically, despite a comprehensive theoretical frame of understanding regarding LD, less attention has been paid to the practical matter of interventions, and children with LD are largely overlooked when it comes to concrete measures (Bele, 2008; Bishop, 1997). Furthermore, there is still a well-documented gap between preschool staff's knowledge about LD and their understanding of learning and teaching methods that are applicable when working with these children. At the same time, both in Norway and Belarus, there is a reported need for increased commitment to stimulate and improve language skills and thus prevent continued growth of the number of children with LD (Aspøy & Bråten, 2014; Dockrell & Lindsay, 2000; MOE, 2016; Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training [UDIR], 2016; Reiling & Wendelborg, 2015). Thus, it is obvious that children with LD in preschools constitute an important target group for research efforts to achieve more in-depth knowledge and understanding of SEN practices that are appropriate for supporting these children.

Studies aimed at utilising the potential of comparing SEN practices in a traditional Eastern and Western country are still sparse (Hanssen, 2017). Therefore, comparisons of two countries, such as Norway and Belarus, are of particular interest.

At least two reasons guided the selection of countries to study. First, the countries represent diverse social, political and ideological contexts. Therefore, they provide a variety of views and solutions on the management of LD in preschools. Insights into varying solutions can contribute to a better understanding of different SEN activities and how to support children with LD. Second, one of the authors has a personal interest, background, understanding of preschools and SEN systems and proficiency in both Belarusian and Norwegian culture and languages.

A comparison provides an opportunity to expand the horizon beyond our own local SEN practices. Such a comparison can offer a way for both countries to learn from each other about how a characteristic knowledge base, which is required for working appropriately with children with LD, is constructed and made coherent through certain activities. We believe that this investigation will benefit the international discussion on SEN practices in preschools.

Given the background described above, this investigation, as part of a larger study, was aimed at examining the following question via a comparison between Belarus and Norway: *How are SEN activities implemented in the physical space for preschoolers with language difficulties?*

In the first part, we expose the theoretical foundation for the selected topic by providing an overview of current research. Arguments are then presented for the selection of the two countries, along with a description of the preschool contexts in each. The selected research methodology and analytical approach are described and analysed, followed by a presentation of the results and a summarising discussion and conclusions.

## Theoretical background

In line with the stated overall aim of focusing on SEN activities for preschoolers with language difficulties, three themes are emphasised. The first theme refers to language

difficulties (LD). The second concerns SEN activities for children with LD, placed within the physical space, thus explaining the relationship between physical facilities, materials or artefacts and activities. The last theme relates to Muller's (2009) and Bernstein's (1999; 2000) concepts of knowledge construction in special needs education, which is used to recognise possible patterns in SEN activities.

The first theme, LD, is theoretically, clinically and practically not assumed as a distinct medical syndrome. Instead it is considered as a manifold and complex phenomenon, encompassing biological and environmental factors that affect a child's language development. Internationally, it has proven challenging to agree on a common definition because of the existing variety of overlapping terms for and various meanings of LD (Bal, 2011; Bele, 2008; Bishop, 2014; Dockrell & Lindsay, 2000; Lindsay & Strand, 2016). For this paper, LD is used as an umbrella term because it corresponds with the understanding of LD in both countries emphasising the *primary* nature of language problems within the frame of children's normal development. Nevertheless, LD is not a single and uniform specific difficulty. One child might have poor receptive ability, while another might be able to understand language but have a limited expressive capacity and miss the grammatical endings of words. Some children speak fluently and have great understanding, but there are complications in comprehending their speech (Bal, 2011; Bele, 2008; Bishop, 1997; Ryder & Leinonen, 2014). This study focused on children with language as their *primary* area of difficulty, connected to weak vocabulary, comprehension of language, contexts, social situations and difficulties participating in social interaction, when compared to peers. Therefore, a range of children with autism, hearing loss, physical causes, stuttering and multilingualism were not included in the study (Hanssen, 2017).

LD as a diagnosis is included in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10), which was issued by the World Health Organization (World Health Organization [WHO], 1992). Both Belarus and Norway use the ICD-10 manual in their clinical and SEN practice (WHO, 1992). As mentioned before, in both countries, there is limited consensus when it comes to identifying, diagnosing, sub-classifying and specifying diagnostic criteria, and numerous questions are raised, especially regarding pre-school-age children who often lack any determined formal diagnosis (Bal, 2011; Bele, 2008; Bishop, 1997; Dockrell & Lindsay, 2000; WHO, 1992). For these reasons, the article highlights SEN activities with children receiving special educational assistance due to LD assumed compatible with the official diagnostic criteria (Hannås & Hanssen, 2016; Hanssen, 2017).

The second theme concerns SEN activities, which constitute adapted support and education for children with LD, and the statutory right to *special educational assistance* in both countries according to Article 14 in the *Code on Education in the Republic of Belarus (CE) 2011* and Chapter 5 of the *Kindergarten Act (KA) 2006*. SEN activities take place within the physical learning space. The meaning of this notion of physical space has been conceptualised from different perspectives. Kemmis, for instance, positions the physical space-time as one of the components constituting his theory of practice architectures, and Nordtømme distinguishes place and materiality as part of imaginative, sensory and experienced space (Kemmis, Wilkinson, Edwards-Groves, Hardy, Grootenboer, & Bristol, 2014; Nordtømme, 2012, 2015).

In this article, physical space is understood as a concrete location, which creates visible physical frames that form, shape and create context for the SEN activities and entails rooms, artefacts and materials such as furniture, decorations etc. Moreover, physical space implies here the phases as well as the arrangements of events, organisation of activities and the people participating in these activities (Säljö, 2015).

The last theme, which applies to Muller's and Bernstein's concepts concerning knowledge construction in special needs education, has been used as a guide for understanding how SEN activities are constructed and implemented. Muller's concept distinguishes analytically two kinds of coherence between the forms and organisation of knowledge constructions by using the notions *conceptual* and *contextual*. Conceptual coherence is bound to the scientific basis, hierarchical structures of abstract concepts derived from disciplines, providing very clear illustrative and evaluative knowledge signposts and regulated by the *adequacy to logic*, where adequacy is guaranteed by external requirements (Muller, 2009, p. 216). Contextual coherence provides segmental connectedness, where each segment is directly oriented to the realities of varying practice aspects and regulated by *contextual adequacy*, where adequacy is internally assured and progression and good answers are less important (Muller, 2009, p. 216).

Bernstein's (1999; 2000) defining characteristics of vertical and horizontal discourses can provide a useful means for depicting the regulation, planning, composition and evaluation of SEN activities. Vertical discourse applies, on the other hand, to knowledge that is distinct, visible, explicit and specialised with a strong disciplinary core and foundation, systematically structured and hierarchically organised. The discourse has strong distributive rules regulating access, transmission and evaluation (Bernstein, 1999; Beach & Bagley, 2013; Hordern, 2015; Rusznyak, 2015). Horizontal discourse refers to knowledge described as oral, local, implicit, indistinct and not created through scientific analysis or anchored within specialised communication, but context-specific, dependent and segmentally organised. The discourse is embedded in ongoing practices without any systematic strategy. Both discourses can provide opportunities in selecting, constructing and reorganising different practices through interacting hierarchically related fields: the field of the production of knowledge in specific ways; the field of re-contextualisation, regarding the selection, appropriation, reorganisation and transformation of knowledge to practice; and the field of reproduction, where knowledge is made accessible for learners through practice (Afdal, 2012; Afdal & Nerland, 2014; Bernstein, 2000). In examining how knowledge is developed within SEN activities, the term knowledge construction in special needs education has been used.

### The contextual frame of the study

To achieve an understanding of the contextual conditions, we will expand the understanding of the Belarusian and Norwegian preschool contexts by examining the legislative frames, curricula and principles for providing SEN assistance.

### Belarusian preschool context

The national preschool mandate is specified in the *Code on Education in the Republic of Belarus (CE) 2011*. The mandate's overarching values and principles emphasise a high priority on and accessibility of education, and highlights the ambition of integrating international standards in education, such as the priority of human values, inclusion, human rights, national culture and traditions as the basis of education (CE 2011, Art. 2; MOE, 2015a).

The Belarusian government elaborated a common curriculum, *an educational program of preschool education*, which is based on the recognition of the intrinsic value of childhood (CE 2011, Art. 279; MOE, 2012). The curriculum has a personal-cultural activity approach in which the activity, along with education, is the driving force behind the overall development of the child. The principle of amplification (enrichment) that provides full use of the specific conditions for children's development has been, and remains, the basis of the educational program (MOE, 2012). The curriculum is structured into several areas, and a systematic and comprehensive approach to language stimulating work with children is considered one of the key tasks of preschools and permeates all activities. The physical space should be designed to take into account the needs of the individual, the society and the state and facilitate the implementation of various educational programs, improving the quality of education according to Chapter 17 of *CE 2011*. Moreover, the physical space should act as a stimulant—a driving force—in the overall process of children's development -and in their inclusion in an active and creative environment (MOE, 2012). Based on this program, additional national programs were adopted in the education of children with various forms of disabilities (CE 2012, Art. 279; MOE, 2012).

The curriculum yields detailed and specific instructions on how defined goals are to be realised in practice. The document specifies the core activities for each age group, provides an overview of children's cognitive, moral, social and physical development, and recommends the use of different methods in the educational work. It provides guidelines regarding the design of preschools and how activities should be designed, created, carried out and adapted to the various needs of children. Further clarification and specification are available in separate programs for children with various challenges (MOE, 2012).

A child's right to special educational assistance before he or she starts school is regulated and embedded in Article 14 of *CE 2011*. Based on a psychological, medical and educational assessment at a regional centre, *The Correction and Development Training and Rehabilitation Centre* (DC), the child's special educational needs are assessed. Belarus provides a variety of options for SEN in preschools. There are special preschools that serve children with severe disabilities; different types of integrated groups, both attending separate classes and combining separate and regular classes in ordinary preschool; and DC, serving children with multiple severe challenges (CE 2011, Art. 267–268). About 70% of all children receiving special educational assistance are integrated in an ordinary preschool (MOE, 2016).

After identifying the specific challenges the child is facing through medical, educational and psychological assessment, a decision is made, in conference with the parents, as to which program is appropriate for the child (CE 2011, Art. 265; Vargas-Baròn,



Janson, & Mufel, 2009). Children's learning and development in relation to the provided special education support is evaluated each year, and any need of further support is indicated (CE 2011, Art. 279 & Art. 265).

Both law and curriculum are good guides for carrying out special educational support, as well as shaping the physical space. Both are designed to be milestones for public education policy and, being based on the priority of human values, should provide free choice of options in SEN education, programs and teaching methods (Vargas-Baròn et al., 2009). There is, however, a lack of research focused on the perception and experience of working with these documents. Nonetheless, they are criticised for having too much influence, lacking flexibility and room for individual choice, impeding independent initiative and having a limited focus on parental involvement (Belokurskaja, 2010; Vargas-Baròn et al., 2009).

### **The Norwegian preschool context**

All children in Norway attend ordinary preschools in inclusive settings. The societal mandate for all preschools is stated in the *Kindergarten Act (KA) 2006*, the document through which preschools are established and regulated. This act promotes democracy, equality, appreciation, solidarity and codetermination. According to §§ 1, 2 and 3 of KA 2006, all children also have the right to participate. It is challenging to convert these values into practice. Substantial variation in the preschool staff's understanding of these values impedes the development of a practice that fully complies with the statutory regulations (Hennum & Østrem, 2016; Østrem, et al., 2009).

The Norwegian government has issued a common curriculum entitled *Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens*, which provides a schema for planning, implementing and assessing preschool activities. The development of children is seen as a holistic, dynamic and closely-knit interaction between children's mental and physical state and the environmental circumstances in which they grow up (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research [MER], 2006). As in Belarus, several learning areas are represented to promote the development and learning of children and to clarify the responsibilities of the staff. Developing a rich language context and stimulating children's language development through activities, as well as creative and imaginative communication, permeates each learning area. Furthermore, the framework plan puts demanding requirements on the physical space as a frame for children's comfort, experience and learning (MER, 2006).

There is little documented knowledge of perceptions and experiences with this framework plan. Some uncertainty has been voiced about understanding the intentions of this plan, something that legitimises different interpretations and approaches to the learning areas. Furthermore, preschool staff members possess limited knowledge about the organisation of time and space and only, to a limited degree, take a critical and analytical look at the framework plan (Østrem et al., 2009). The most important aspect of the plan, in the experience of parents and children, is free play and friendship, while the staff communicates an increased focus on working with children's language and learning. This creates a conflict in which the dilemma is the desire to both increase focus on the academic work and learning, while still protecting the freedom and play of childhood as a value in its own right (Hennum & Østrem, 2016; Østrem et al., 2009;

Rønning, 2010). This document is under revision and expected to be completed during 2017.

Children who, according to expert assessment, need adapted support or education, have a statutory right to such. Parents may individually, or in consultation with the preschool, request that the *educational and counselling service* (PPT)—an independent, expert authority—assess their children's need for special education assistance. Based on the expert assessment of the PPT, the preschool owner makes a decision to grant or deny the request for special educational assistance, according to Chapter 5 of *KA 2006*. This assistance consists of individual facilitation and is included in ordinary preschool education.

Even though it is not mandatory by law, Norwegian municipalities usually require that individual learning plans (IOPs) are prepared for all children with SEN. These plans are based on specialist evaluations of each child's individual preconditions for learning and development and describe, for instance, the aims, content and extent of their need for SEN support. The benefit the child is receiving from support is evaluated annually, and an assessment of the child's need for continued support is made.

The law and curriculum provide a decent guide, both to the physical space and to drafting the SEN support, but they are criticised for not being more detailed and specific about the content and design of preschool activities. There is a reported lack of concrete measures and follow-up on the progression of the work (Østrem et al., 2009). The planning of SEN activities is founded on knowledge about children's development and learning, on systematic evaluation and on parents' and experts' cooperation. Thus, a space for doing the activities and working with SEN children is provided. The general unclear basis and polarisation between involved parties may impede stable and lasting dispositions for SEN activities, and expertise and competence are needed to interpret and implement any framework (Rønning, 2010; Sjøvik, 2014).

Despite some similarities between Norway and Belarus, the differences are obvious, principled and could be assigned to historical, cultural traditions, ideological foundations and political character. The differences can also be impacted by linguistics or semantics (e.g., variable understanding and use of various educational concepts). One of the most noteworthy differences is that Belarusian education culture still lacks consciousness of the inclusion principle and is slowly moving toward inclusion. Therefore, the number of children attending regular preschools with full-time or part-time placement in segregated groups for children with similar disabilities, which are integrated in ordinary preschools, remains unchanged (MOE, 2016). In the Norwegian system, inclusive educational settings are already well-established and all children attend ordinary preschools.

## Design and method

According to the stated aim and the theoretical foundation, the selection of the methodological approach underpinning this study was aimed at obtaining a rich and nuanced description of the studied phenomenon. In parallel, the approach also included an interpretation to deepen the understanding and meaning of the phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The two compared cases were studied through video observations to capture the complexity and situatedness of the performed SEN activities



(Flyvbjerg, 2006; Johnsen, 2013; Yin, 2014). The advantage of comparison is the potential for achieving a clear and meaningful image of one practice by relating it to other practices. This kind of comparative approach has the capacity to expose and reveal covert assumptions of practices (Burnard, Dillon, Rusinek, & Sætheret, 2008; Johnsen, 2013).

The comparative approach chosen needed to address certain challenges to facilitate a comparable and coherent understanding of the scrutinised phenomena, as addressed by Bäckström-Widjeskog and Hansén (2002) and Pepin (2000). Reaching what is called *linguistic equivalence* concerns problems in translating from one language to another and finding terms that correspond and refer in the same way to the same phenomena (Bäckström-Widjeskog and Hansén, 2002; Pepin, 2000). Three different languages were involved in collecting and transcribing data and in writing the article: Norwegian, Russian (the national language of Belarus) and English. In this process, the researchers' common language proficiency provided a prerequisite and resource to achieve an acceptable shared understanding. The challenge of attaining what is called *contextual equivalence* is about understanding the historical, social, political and cultural surroundings of the preschools. The presentation of the contextual frame of the study in the previous section exposes our ambition of striving for contextual equivalence. An additional issue regards what may be described as *organisational equivalence*, raising the question of how the preschool education systems are organised in both countries and which operative and ethical principles are guiding the preschool activities. The two latter issues are already in part dealt with in the presentations of the involved countries. Despite several differences, the countries seem to share similar values, as manifested by their overarching principles for education—for instance, the principle of inclusion, as well as the statutory right for children with special needs to obtain special educational assistance (CE 2011 Art. 2; KA 2006 §1; MOE, 2015a).

### Selection criteria

To obtain relevant information, some rough criteria for selection of both preschools, preschool staff and children were established. Preschools in both countries had to be public<sup>1</sup> and offer special educational assistance for children with LD<sup>2</sup>. Because the establishment of inclusion differs between countries, Belarusian preschools with integrated groups of children with LD were selected. In Norway, preschools that enrol children with LD were chosen. For practical reasons, the procedure of selection was delimited geographically to one county in each country. Several preschools in both countries were contacted by phone and e-mail with the aim of finding preschools that provided special educational assistance to children with LD. Those who filled the established criteria and were interested in getting involved in the project received further information, oral and written, about the planned observations. Thus, 10 public preschools (5 from each country) were selected to participate in the study. Belarusian preschools had between 80 and 120 children. In Norway, two of the preschools had between 90 and 120 children in total, while three ranged from 24 to 40 children.

The guiding principle 'as like as the population of interest as possible' had been used for sampling the preschool staff. It means that 'maximising diversity' has been reached by choosing diverse staff in terms of formal qualifications and working experience

(Stake, 2005, p. 450). Therefore, preschool staff, responsible for planning as well as for carrying out SEN activities for children with LD, were chosen. Altogether, ten informants were recruited from five different preschools in each country. The informants from Belarus were five females between 30 and 50 years of age. All of them had professional university educations that qualified them for work in preschools; three held specialisations—one as a music teacher, another as a speech therapist and the third as a preschool teacher. The two remaining informants were special needs education teachers. The selected participants from Norway included one male and four females between 40 and 60 years of age. Two of the key informants were assistants with secondary school education, while the remaining three were preschool teachers, in addition to which one had a one-year professional specialisation in special needs education.

Even though the study focused on SEN activities, criteria for the selection of children with whom the employees in both countries worked were also established: the children had to be five years of age and of both genders. Children had to have either Norwegian or Russian as their first language. They had to have all aspects of development on a normal course but with language as their *primary* area of difficulty in terms of weak vocabulary and comprehension as compared to peers. They had to be enrolled in educational and counselling services, had to have received SEN assistance and had to have participated in SEN activities—both individually and within groups.

### Video observations

The data for this article were collected from 2014 to 2015 via video observations. Before the formal observations started, two days were spent in each preschool to get acquainted with the settings, the staff and the children. An advanced wide-angle camera was used, in accordance with an adaptive diversity principle, but it was still easy to handle. During all observations, the camera was placed on a floor stand in the back of the room, partly to avoid disturbances and partly to provide an optimal overview. Furthermore, with this placement, the researcher was able to observe SEN activities first-hand.

Observable SEN activities in both countries were organised both as individual and group sessions. The groups were about the same size in both countries: approximately four to six children were enrolled in each. However, the group sessions in Belarus consisted of children with similar difficulties and needs. In Norway, sessions were individually adapted to the difficulties and needs of one particular child, but they also included other children without SEN (Hanssen, 2017, p. 7).

After four to six individual and group SEN activities were carried out with each employee, the data became more saturated—that is, repetitions of the same situations and generic features of an SEN activity occurred, while the number of new perspectives decreased. This realisation corresponds with the principle that after a certain period, information becomes saturated (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

The technical quality of all recordings was good. The next step involved transcribing voices and pictures into written text with the intention of providing as complete a picture as possible from what was caught on camera (Jewitt, 2012; Løkken, 2012).

## Analysis

Guided by the aim and the research question of the study, certain components were outlined for analyses: the arrangement of *material environments* (rooms, furniture, artefacts and decorations); *the organisation of activities* (regulation and planning); SEN activity *phases* (beginning, introduction, performing, summarising and evaluating); and *the organisation of events* (singing, dancing, drawing, listening and games). The focus was on the visual representation of video observations, as implemented SEN-activities. Although the verbal interaction was not in focus, it provided a schematic structure for framing the activities. Each SEN session represented the above described components divided in certain time frames, i.e. fragments, which were transcribed into text in the respective language with the aim of preserving accuracy and sufficiency.

Transcriptions enabled systematic data analysis on three levels: an individual level, a case level and, finally, a level across the two cases. To handle and reduce the large amount of data, a systematic strategy was required. Therefore, a qualitative content analysis (QCA) with an *inductive approach* was used (Elo & Kyngös, 2008).

According to Elo and Kyngös (2008), QCA includes open coding, creating categories and abstraction. The first step was to organise the qualitative data through open coding. The purpose of this was to seek a preliminary contextual structure in the data.

During the analysis process, repeated viewing of video fragments was important to avoid overlooking the original context. The data were thoroughly read and watched, thus providing an overview and a starting point. The impressions from the reading, together with watching video fragments, triggered ideas for preliminary themes and tentative categories. The next step was to more systematically search for consistent categories. From the beginning of the categorisation process, stable differences in the patterns for activities implemented and conducted in the two countries' preschool settings were observed. Therefore, divergences that made it complicated to compress a single title for each evolving category were noticed from the start. The result was the expression of the abstracted data into four main categories of description organised as binary pairs: *regulated – flexible*; *pre-defined – diffuse*; *consequential – casual*; *repetitive – disruptive*. The distinction between the pairs should, however, not be interpreted as extremes in terms of dichotomies. Instead, the relationship should be understood as various possible positions on a continuum within a category.

## Ethical issues

Using videos for collecting data actualises a set of ethical considerations concerning preschool staff, children and parents. Information about all aspects of the investigation, including the informants' rights, were given to the target group, and signed consent forms for their participation were received. Parents to children with LD gave their permission for video recording and the remaining parents were able to refuse or allow their children being video recorded. Anonymity was ensured for all participants. Confidentiality was secured by excluding aspects that would allow for recognition of the participants and preschools in the respective contexts.

## Findings

The findings are organised below according to the identified categories and described through the excerpts from the minutes captured during the video observations. Descriptions and selected excerpts appear as typical for each category across the sample, and all five preschools from each country are represented in the description of the findings.

*Regulated – Flexible:* The first category focuses on the regulation of SEN activities with the physical space in the foreground. Here, the possible positions vary between regulated, authority-framed and strict directives conducted by the staff and, on the other side, loosely framed staff-interpreted activities.

Observations showed that the activities in Belarusian preschools tended to lean towards the extreme of *regulated* in this category. The rooms, specifically designed for SEN exercises, were large with high ceilings and well-lit through big windows. They were thematically decorated, and the artefacts were carefully chosen to serve the activities regulated according to the aims set up for SEN. The rooms exposed a rich repertoire of physical artefacts such as easels, dolls, cards, pictures, applications, paint, paintbrushes, costumes, musical instruments etc. The use of these artefacts was strictly controlled by the staff. The access to the rooms was regulated, and they were not available for use outside the schedule. The decoration was not only limited to entertaining play, but strictly regulated to fulfil specific aims in SEN activities. The staff in Belarusian preschools was involved in, and committed to, decorating the SEN rooms, which, for instance, showed an imaginative winter landscape, a fall forest with colourful trees and rain drops or an old-fashioned timber house for trolls or animals.

Norwegian preschools, however, tended to orient themselves towards the *flexible* end of the continuum. The preschools did not have designated rooms for SEN activities. Instead, activities were carried out in any room available at the time or in a corner of a room used simultaneously for other purposes. The activities would, however, have to be done elsewhere if the room was fully occupied. Compared to preschools in Belarus, the decoration of the rooms in Norwegian preschools showed large variations. For example, some rooms were decorated with children's art work, alphabetic letters, information for parents, instructions etc., while some rooms had no decorations at all. Furthermore, no link to the aims of SEN activities could be observed. The repertoire of materials was as rich as in Belarus, but the availability of the materials was less regulated and more flexible. The activities did not seem to be thematically integrated in a systematically devised frame. It was difficult to observe a distinct connection and regulation between the specific aim for SEN, the rooms, the artefacts and the ways of conducting activities. Sometimes, for example, the selection of materials was regulated by the staff, and sometimes children could choose materials by themselves, but the staff regulated all access to the rooms.

To summarise, this category exposes clearly observable different emphases between the preschools in the two countries. The SEN approach in Belarus followed a strictly regulated plan, while the Norwegian preschools followed a less strict and more flexible pattern in the decoration, in the use of artefacts and in the way activities were carried out.

*Pre-defined – Diffuse:* The second category is closely connected to the first but accentuates the planning of SEN activities against the physical space. The tension here occurs between strictly and vaguely pre-planned activity arrangements.

In Belarus, as the observations showed, the activities were organised in accordance with the *pre-defined* end of the category and were systematically planned and explicitly defined throughout the entire process. The idea was also clearly thematised. This concept means that the words and the sounds children were going to practice were decided by the staff in advance, and the music, the dances and the use of artefacts in the physical space were not chosen by coincidence. Instead, all the activities and artefacts had their assigned functions. For instance, the overall theme of one of the Belarusian preschools activities was ‘fall’ and dealt with trees during that season. The room was prepared and decorated as a fall forest in bright colours.

The articulation exercise focused on the sound *a*. The idea was to increase children’s phonemic awareness of the sound. The words, songs and poems children were invited to practice dealt with, for example, trees, such as birches and oaks with roots and trunks with leaves, and with fall colours (green, yellow, red etc.). The articulation of the sound *a* in Russian was the objective for all exercises surrounded by a choreographically expressive view of a fall forest.

In Norway, however, the activities showed a tendency to lean towards *diffuse* on the continuum. Some of the activities were pre-defined, while others seemed to follow a random concept. The room was not specifically prepared for a certain thematic purpose, and a lack of coherence between the activities and the physical space was obvious in several cases. One excerpt from the observations illustrates an open approach in which the employee asked the children what they wanted to do. The children suggested singing, and the activity started with a song, which was followed by the children’s second suggestion: playing with Lego. Then, the children were free to construct whatever they wanted for a certain amount of time. After a while, the children were asked to count the number, the colours and the sizes of the blocks used. The activity ended with a game aimed at training children’s memory and concentration by hiding one of the children’s constructions at a time (‘Kims lek’). Language stimulation was thus integrated as a part of the play through communication, but without any closer specification regarding, for instance, the articulation of certain sounds or words, as far as the observer could notice.

In sum, the activities in Belarusian and Norwegian preschools revealed conceptually different profiles between the extremes within the binary pair. The Belarusian case was distinctly and steadily oriented towards a pre-defined pattern by the conscious selection of specific language skills to exercise. In the Norwegian case, the language exercise grew spontaneously out of the communication practiced in relation to the children’s play.

*Consequential – Casual:* While the previous category accentuated the planning of SEN activities, the third category concentrates on the composition of subsequent events. Here, the location alters between strong and steadfast and the random structure of events.

In Belarus, the observed events of SEN activities were positioned closer to *consequential*, in that they formed a chain that led to specified and expected consequences. The aim of one of the activities was to teach sounds, words, grammatical constructions and language use related to the theme of winter. Carefully selected decorations and

artefacts such as falling snow, trees in their winter shapes, snowballs, rolling pins, dough etc. accompanied the events as a background so that children could explore an imaginative space.

An excerpt from the observations illustrates how this was practiced when the pre-school teacher, with excitement in her voice, said, *Children, we have received a letter from the reindeer!* She opened the envelope, reading loudly: *We have been invited to visit the reindeer on the North Pole. She needs help with baking a cake.* Then, the chain of events was performed by the whole group in a consistent way in line with the task given. Children went on skiing through the forest, met various challenges on their way to the North Pole and relaxed after a long ski trip by playing with snowflakes to train their eye movements. When the children finally reached the reindeer's house, they started baking the cake. They then played (sledding, snowballs) and, finally, returned home again.

In the Norwegian preschools, the observed events related closely to the *casual* end of the spectrum. The events of SEN activities occurred in a more episodic and unforeseen way, and the training of language was not composed as a subsequent chain. Not even the physical space was arranged in any specific way. Instead, the events were sporadically assembled along with the ongoing activities, and no specific sound, grammatical structure or words were explicitly attached to the events.

The staff collected the group around the table in a corner of the room and said, *It's been a long time since the group was properly gathered.* They continued whispering: *What have we got? We have got new books, and we will look at them later, but first, would you like to sing a song? Which one?* After some disagreement about which song to choose, the preschool teacher finally decided on one; a song was performed with the children in the middle of the room, and, when finished, the children returned to their seats. After a while, the teacher handed the children books and asked them to open the books and look at them. Later, the children chose which tasks they wanted to do themselves. Some of them brought pencils and started to draw, while some coloured pictures and others just glanced through the books. The entire activity was open, spontaneous and casual. While the children looked at and drew in the books, the teacher discussed pictures and colours with the children and tied the task together with the learning goals.

The description of the third category points to a gradually increasing consistency in identified differences between the patterns within the binary pair. In Belarus, the composition of subsequent events was tied to a strong and dedicated concept, while the Norwegian events were structured more haphazardly.

*Repetitive – Disruptive:* The fourth category concentrates on the ways performed SEN activities were reflected upon and evaluated together with the children. Here, the positions varied between a retrospective summarising reflection on the activities and a prompt ending of the activity without any evaluating discussion.

The Belarusian findings showed a clear tendency to concentrate on the *repetitive* part of the pair. Because plenty of time was offered for a summarising and evaluating discussion, the children had the opportunity to reflect on the knowledge and skills gained.

The following excerpt demonstrates the activity with the overall theme of domestic animals. The room was decorated in harmony with the theme. The teacher, in the role



of a cat, allowed time to repeat and reflect on activities while children played the roles of kittens. At the end of the session, loud music started, and the surprised children stood up and looked at the ‘teacher cat’. She said, reciting a rhyme in Russian in a firm voice, *You have been kittens and now you are kids! Please hurry up; we have to reach the train back home!* Upon arriving ‘home’, the children, now out of their roles, were gathered in a circle and discussed the trip.

Observations pointed to a retrospective process of returning to certain moments concerning the ways the activities were conducted through questions such as the following: What have we been doing today? Which words have we learnt? What kind of landscape have we visited? and Which animals have we met? Children were asked to express their responses through drawings, thus enabling the staff to grasp children’s answers and reflections on the posed questions. The repetitive character was manifested in returning to the events, such as songs and plays, and to the earlier trained sounds, grammatical constructions and language use.

The Norwegian findings, on the other hand, revealed a *disruptive* pattern. No opportunity was provided for a common retrospective summarising and evaluating reflection on the exercise practiced.

The excerpt shows the child sitting at a table in a narrow room playing the lotto together with a preschool assistant. Specific sounds *k* and *g* and words containing these sounds were explicitly chosen for training. The room was not specifically prepared and decorated for the purpose of the activity. The assistant drew a card, and the child suddenly exclaimed, pointing to another card, *I know there is a ‘pam’ (kam = comb), under this one.* The assistant repeated, *The kam starts with k and you form the sound...?* The child was uneasy, arising yawning from the chair and saying *baaak*. The assistant asked, *Are you finished for today?* and then abruptly exclaimed: *You can go then!* The child ran out, and the activity was disrupted without any further retrospective reflection.

In another excerpt, the topic was the body, and children were asked to paint faces and, throughout the activity, talk about it. At the end of the session, the children became impatient and started to ask, *Are we finished now?* The preschool teacher made the following suggestion: *Maybe we take head, shoulders, knees and toes (the song), just to shake loose. We have been sitting for a long time.* After some disagreement about selecting which song they would sing, the teacher abruptly declared, *Finished, thank you for today.* As in the former case, the activity was suddenly ended without any attempt at summarising.

In sum, this category pinpoints that the Belarusian activities appear to support an appropriate opportunity for stimulating children’s language through retrospective repetitive elements. In the Norwegian cases, no follow-up discussion and no time was offered for summarising and evaluating reflections.

## Conclusions and implications

The starting point was the investigation of how SEN activities for preschool children with LD were implemented within the physical space in Belarus and Norway. Using an exploratory comparative case study approach, we distinguished, with the support of Muller’s (2009) and Bernstein’s (1999; 2000) concepts, two kinds of knowledge

construction in special needs education in various settings. Through observations, four categories, structured as binary pairs, could be identified as valid for both countries. Although a common category system was established, the content revealed diverse profiles.

According to Muller's (2009) concept, the Belarusian preschool SEN activities were systematically pre-planned, strictly governed, framed and connected to a thematically and sequentially organised process of knowledge construction. The activities approached were primarily attached to one of the poles in the binary pairs: the *regulated, pre-defined, consequential* and *repetitive*. One possible explanation is linked to the disciplinary epistemological core of developmental psychology, medicine and speech therapy influencing special needs education (defectology<sup>3</sup>) and a strict core curriculum structure. The concept is bound to a scientific basis visible, for instance, in the language use. The focus is carefully selected, systematised and contains pre-planned elements in accordance with the physical space in stimulating children's language development. This also means that a hierarchical structure characterises the way in which the staff position themselves towards the children (Bernstein, 1999; 2000). The activities are conducted by the staff, and children reproduce and have to comply with the structures and expectations provided. Thus, the Belarusian case appears closely connected to Muller's notion of *conceptual coherence*.

Almost as consistently as the Belarusian preschool activities followed the route of *conceptual coherence*, the activities in Norwegian preschools are clustered around the corresponding pole in each category. The activities were identified as feasible for instant and spontaneous initiatives by the staff or by the children themselves, sometimes diffuse and multi-activity oriented. The activities were grouped around the reverse expressions—*flexible, diffuse, casual* and *disruptive*—and usually without consciously making use of the physical space. The activities mirrored a dissolving move from specialised disciplines to a general pedagogical approach and loosely core curriculum structure, enabling children the right to participation and involvement. This approach means that activities originate from children's and staff's momentary interests and artefacts available in the immediate context. The possibilities of contributing to the activities created an atmosphere of a discovery process between children and the staff where a common status seemed to be shared. In Muller's terms, the profile of the activities tended towards *contextual coherence*. The profiles for preschools in the two countries represent, as shown, distinct orientations. Adding to Muller's concepts, the Belarusian preschool activities, in Bernstein's terms, can be characterised as representing a structural pattern of *vertical* knowledge construction in special needs education, with strong distributive rules regulating access, transmission and evaluation. In contrast, in Norwegian preschools, the activities were depicted as local, flexible, spontaneous, segmented and unsystematically organised strategy, indicating *horizontal* knowledge construction in special needs education, to use Bernstein's term.

The differences described above relate to the staff's professional competence in Belarus and Norway. The findings are in line with previous studies of SEN practice in the contexts of both countries (Hannås & Hanssen, 2016; Hanssen, 2017). In the case of Belarus, a specific professional competence is available at all stages of the SEN assistance—from assessment of the child's needs to implementation of SEN sessions. Distinct identification and representation of staff as professional practitioners is

reflected in the arrangements of the physical space and in the ways SEN activities are implemented. The Belarusian staff seem to be prepared to select, reorganise, transmit and adapt the curriculum choreographically to themes aimed at exercising specific LD by utilising the staff's professional specialties.

In the case of Norway, specific professional competence is ensured and accessible through the expert assessment and individual decision granting or denying special needs assistance. Through the phases of drafting IOPs, planning and implementation of SEN activities, professional experts provide counselling and guidance to both staff, parents and children. Among those who implemented SEN activities, only one had further specialisation in special needs education. Many were assistants, and some had a preschool teacher's education without a specialisation in special needs education. Therefore, they depended on guidance from professionals with specific competence to implement SEN assistance. Interestingly, the guidance was observed to be unsatisfactory and not offered frequently enough (Hannås & Hanssen, 2016). Together with restricted availability of SEN rooms, SEN assistance resulted in looser frames and boundaries than in Belarusian preschools. Hence, it was difficult to distinguish SEN activities from ordinary ones in preschools. The ways of carrying out SEN activities within the physical space seemed to mirror challenges in representation and identification of the preschool staff as professional practitioners in their work with children with LD. A consequence of loose boundaries between various SEN activities seemed, however, to lead to a closer social and more inclusive way of carrying out SEN assistance among Norwegian pre-school staff. The curriculum was selected and transformed to a unique context-specific activity.

The results are unique in a comparative sense as they overtly expose different SEN practices originating from preschools that represent different political, cultural and research traditions. These traditions seem to generate conceptually different views of how the needs of children can be attended to in practice. In Belarus, sustainable and fundamental research and a prevailing political tradition have created a normative societal culture that generates a perception of servility, obedience, conformity, dependence on authorities and an approach of sustainability. These approaches can likely maximise learning and cognitive achievement, but they tend to restrict children's ability to choose, reflect and influence (Belokurskaja, 2010; Starzinskaja, 2011; Vargas-Barón et al., 2009).

Compared to Belarus, the Norwegian fragmented and conflicting special needs education research, along with an ambiguous ideological and political governance, is criticised for contributing to a competing, contradictory and heterogeneous view of special needs education. The consequence has been that a personally-oriented and arbitrary approach to special needs education has emerged, thus maintaining an obscure and non-sustainable way of conducting activities. Nevertheless, these approaches expand children's abilities to influence the program, to freely express themselves and to provide space for individual initiatives, experiments and collaborative adoption of a critical stance. Behind such approaches are ideas of freedom, divergence and independence from the curricular directives (Arnesen, 2012; Hausstätter & Reindal, 2016; Hennum & Østrem, 2016).

The results of this study contribute to the research literature in that they offer a both narrow and extensive viewpoint of the implementation of SEN activities within the

physical space for preschoolers with LD. This broad scope provides an opportunity to look at and position the conditions in one's own preschools against different ones, thereby offering an additional perspective by bringing new experiences and providing enlightenment regarding the phenomenon investigated. However, in spite of the seemingly clear results, the overall methodological approach has to be critically scrutinised, and several limitations must be noted.

As the purpose of this study was to obtain a rich and nuanced description of the studied phenomenon and, in parallel, an interpretation to deepen the existing understanding and meaning, the investigation was limited to a relatively small number of informants, a few preschools and one type of difficulty: LD. Therefore, broader generalisability of the results was affected (Hanssen, 2017).

For making meaningful comparisons, the objective was to assure we addressed concepts that are comparable in different settings. This is a challenging task, especially when dealing with heterogeneous phenomena such as LD and SEN activities, which are strongly influenced by social contexts and made more complex by cultural diversification. Moreover, not only linguistic, but also fundamental differences in conceptual structure between Norwegian and Belarusian educational, theoretical and research traditions may deeply affect the understanding of LD and SEN activities. However, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), realities are multiple constructions and not 'true' in any absolute sense. Therefore, phenomena LD and SEN activities may be understood and used differently by individual persons and groups.

Methodologically, video observation is a challenging, complicated and time-consuming way of collecting data, although no extensive difficulties were faced related to, for instance, the camera positions or the quality of the recordings. Balancing between closeness and distance, observation was still a delicate matter as it caused uncertainty about, for instance, how the presence of the researcher could influence different situations and colour the data. To address these challenges, visits were made some days before the observations for the purpose of becoming acquainted with the settings, the staff and the children, and this was of great practical use for carrying out the video observations in a reasonable manner (i.e. Jewitt, 2012; Knoblauch, Schnettler, Raab, & Soeffner, 2006).

The analysis of the binary pairs constituting the identified categories emerged as obvious, unproblematic and clear when seen from one side. Even if—on a manifest level—they express opposite positions between mutually exclusive concepts, the difference on a latent level is more complex. Our categorisation of binary opposition is value-laden and attached to our frame of references and may appear as too unilateral by providing an illusory view of exactness. Semantically, the selected category concepts may also refer to various meanings depending on different cultural and political conditions. Regardless, they strive to capture features valid for conditions in their respective countries. Despite these critical remarks, the pairs express a profiled densification of characteristic and obvious features, thereby exposing different solutions for special needs education in Norway and Belarus.

An attempt was made to ensure the study's validity by presenting and discussing parts of the investigation at different seminars. This process can be understood as member checking, where researchers were seeking the trustworthiness of the findings and its interpretations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). As far as possible, the readers of this

article were informed about the research process in detail (Hanssen, 2017). Therefore, from our perspective, (familiarity with both contexts, the preschool systems and all languages involved), the results reflect and describe the realities in an appropriate way. Consequently, the risk of preconceptions compromised the validation of the findings. The advantage in this case is that, at least to some extent, the requirements of achieving contextual, linguistic and organisational equivalence were met.

In conclusion, a set of recommendations for considerations can be made. Consideration of physical space as a meaningful resource and power in SEN practice is dependent on the ways in which preschool staff conceptualise and form their SEN practice by appealing to knowledge domains and positioning themselves as professional, knowledgeable agents in the special needs education practice. In turn, the preparation of teachers qualified for working with preschool children with SEN would benefit from a critical review of the ways of constructing and organising knowledge in special teacher/preschool teacher education and the ways in which the construction and the content of curricular documents are important. There may be a risk of having an overly normative and specified knowledge base and directives, which might reduce professional autonomy, thus generating a mechanical and reproductive practice. Risks might also be present in a dispersed and individualised knowledge base and a loosely structured curricular approach, resulting in an unsystematic variety of individual practices without common understanding of what it is and how it should be (Afdal & Nerland, 2014; Hennum & Østrem, 2016; Starzinskaja, 2011). Therefore, promoting a closer dialogue between different practices can offer a way for individuals to learn from each other. This study can be seen as an initial attempt to open a dialogue aimed at achieving a better understanding of in-depth knowledge construction to provide an impetus for re-defining and changing preschool conditions to support children with language difficulties.

## Notes

1. Due to the higher prevalence of public preschools, which are municipally maintained in both countries (MOE, 2016; UDIR, 2016).
2. Inclusion is recognised as an overarching principle for all education in both countries; therefore, SEN assistance is included in ordinary preschool education (MOE, 2015a; UDIR, 2016).
3. A special discipline dealing with impairments, disabilities and developmental delays, existing from 1920. The Belarusian system still uses the term 'defectology', despite the title having been officially changed to 'special education' (Vygotskij, in Vargas-Baròn et al., 2009).

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